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ABSTRACT

Global technological and demographic changes have established the need for vocational training and labor force development. The problems begin in defining the type of training needed, its effectiveness, how to fund it, and how to ensure benefits for the trainee, the employer, the national economy, and society. Four pitfalls to training should be avoided. The first is exclusive reliance on institutional systems, because the formal educational system is unable to create the exact conditions of the daily world of work. The second pitfall is the opposite: trusting only on-the-job or enterprise training, which restricts workers to training that is too narrow or employer specific. Third, training is deficient if restricted to its technical aspect alone. Nontechnical skills such as adaptability, independence, responsibility, communication ability and ability to learn how to learn are also necessary. The fourth pitfall is the lack of access to training programs by small businesses and independent workers. Collaborations between training institutions and small businesses, facilitated by public authorities and unions, can overcome this obstacle. The goal should be training and education program that combine, often in new ways, training in schools, training institutions, and enterprises and achieving a balance between general and specific training. (CML)

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The International Labor Office is the permanent secretariat of the 159-member International Labor Organization, a United Nations specialized agency.

Vocational training: pitfalls to avoid

Rapid technological change, ever-intensifying competition, large-scale re-organization: in the turbulence at the end of this century, the world of work and employment is like a tossing ship caught in crossed winds. For the captains of industry as well as the bosses of small enterprises, the direction to follow is not always sure, the landmarks unreliable, the margins of manoeuvre confined.

Under such circumstances, more than ever before there is need for vocational and professional training at all levels: by enterprises, which must have the most qualified workers available at short notice; by the workers themselves, who are aware that with inadequate or unadapted qualifications, they will be mercilessly eliminated in the race for jobs.

Everyone readily agrees with these facts. Governments, employers' and workers' organizations, human resource specialists, all have little trouble convincing public opinion of the need for increased efforts – including financial ones – for improved professional training.

Whether the issue is to prepare entrance into active economic life, to help workers whose enterprises are in difficulty, to recycle and reclassify older workers, to promote equal work opportunity for women – in all these cases training appears to be the real solution.

The problems begin when defining more precisely the type of training needed. What are its goals, its means, the degree of its effectiveness? Who should pay for it? How can it be assured that the training benefits the person receiving it as well as the enterprise, the national economy and society as a whole?

The training required is simply that which meets the needs of enterprises and leads to employment for workers.

• With this in mind, four pitfalls are to be avoided, according to the preparatory studies and the conclusions of a European tripartite meeting* held recently at the ILO in Geneva.

• The first would be to rely exclusively on institutional systems: schools, training centers, general or specialized teaching establishments. Such exclusive reliance has never been strictly the case in any event, for on-the-job training and apprenticeships have always played the part of a "conveyor belt" of knowledge, especially in the traditional trades.

The extension of mandatory schooling, however, and the growth of theoretical education have led, in certain countries, to a near-total domination of institutional training for various forms of initial practical learning. Institutional training systems, it is alleged, maintain equality of opportunity and prepare students for professional life, without assuming a need for earning immediate return or subjecting the individual to the needs of industrial production.

Experience has shown, however, that whatever its effort to adapt to change and stick to practical matters, the formal institution is, by definition, unable to create the exact conditions of the daily world of work. In a society in which progress accelerates and needs change continually, formal training is always out of step with innovations and actual practical requirements.

• The second pitfall to avoid is the opposite: that of trusting only on-the-job or enterprise training, leaving to the educational system the task of providing basic training of a general nature.

The danger here is that workers might be restricted by a training which is too specific and narrow, useful only to the enterprise at a given time, but harmful to the interests of individuals and their professional mobility, and leading to eventual unemployment.

In the 18th century Adam Smith pointed out that as a result of the division of labor, workers had lost a great deal of specialized knowledge. Today, the bureaucratic organization of certain enterprises tends to reduce certain trades to simplified tasks modified to fit a particular situation. "Skills in a given context may have no value in another," one specialist has observed.

The same author adds: "Increases in unemployment, particularly in long-term unemployment, ought to warn enterprises and force them to question their own organizations and the manner in which they privately train workers in useless skills."

• The third pitfall is a variation of the second, more complex and perhaps more subtle: training, however broad and however complete, professionally speaking, is deficient if restricted to its technical aspect alone.

As the conclusions of the ILO meeting emphasize: "workers are now expected to

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To our readers

With this issue of August 1992 one cycle ends and another is due to begin.

For our next issue, in November, the present modest publication will be replaced by a new title: a 24-page magazine of slightly smaller size, each issue containing a special series on a current social problem and a varied selection of articles grouped in regularly appearing sections.

Why change a formula which has, according to the standard phrase, already proven itself? Because "the world and the times change." If the aims of the ILO remain the same, the context and methods behind its activities have greatly evolved. Particularly with the incredible expansion of the mass media, it is not so much a question today of providing information – with which the world is now saturated – as of putting it into perspective. In other words, of providing rigorous in-depth analyses and superior understanding of issues.

Such at least is the goal of the new magazine. Our readers – specialists in labor policies and administration, employers, trade unionists, university graduates, researchers, social scientists – are by definition well-informed people. We would hope, through confrontation of new approaches and ideas, complementary viewpoints and the dialogue of the social partners, to aid these readers in designing the features of the future they have all been called to build.

During the course of next year we will carry out a survey by questionnaire which will enable us to gather opinion and comment concerning the new magazine and also update our mailing lists.

With the help of all, readers and social partners within the ILO, we will face the challenge of change. Thank you most sincerely for your collaboration in the work ahead.

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possess non-tangible and non-technical skills or qualities such as 'quality lifestyle,' capacity to adapt, independence, responsibility and communication skills ... they are also expected to acquire the ability to ask questions and learn how to learn, as qualification needs change continuously."

The report prepared for the meeting testified to the exceptional enterprise training programs in operation in companies such as Avionics in Europe, Corning Glass in the US, and Motorola, whose seven million dollar training budget has become an "educational" budget of some 120 million dollars, financing a veritable university and reaching out to more than 1,200 people throughout the world.

• The fourth pitfall is hidden precisely in the sizeable training efforts of large companies: complete, operational, company-wide training programs which are unavailable to employees of small enterprises and independent workers. It is the responsibility of the public authorities and the trade unions to identify and get around this particular problem.

Small and medium-sized enterprises rarely have the means to undertake research and development and have very limited budgets for training. The ILO report notes that one way to overcome these obstacles is to bring training institutions and smaller enterprises together for collaboration.

Thus, for example, the Ecole Technique de Saint-Croix in Switzerland sells products and services to earn income to run its technical school. In the United Kingdom, more than 1,500 graduates work in the TCS (Teaching Company Scheme) as salaried associates in enterprises of all sizes, to which they bring their knowledge and from which they receive payment and professional experience. The Steinbeis Foundation in Germany is another example of a teaching institution promoting technical development in medium and small-scale enterprises.

"Effective solutions for training cannot be found exclusively in schools, nor in training institutions or firms," notes the conclusions of the ILO meeting. "The best prospects are offered by training and education programs that combine, often in new ways, training in schools, training institutions and enterprises."

The participants also pointed out that the specific training offered by enterprises is harmful to the interests of the individual worker and to the country, because it hinders workers' mobility and consequently their redeployment. The conclusions emphasized "the essential role of workers' and employers' organizations," which is to "aid enterprises to find a balance between general end specific training." ■

* *The impact of technological change on work and training.* ILO, Geneva, 1992. ISBN 92-2-108114-1.